

## Roman villas of the Greek east and the villa in Gregory of Nyssa *Ep.*20

J. J. Rossiter

### Roman villas in the east

Despite the steady output in recent years of studies on Roman villas in the different regions of the Roman world, one area which remains unduly neglected in terms of villa studies is the Greek-speaking eastern half of the Roman empire. General discussions of Roman villas and their regional types have tended either to exclude the eastern provinces altogether or else to offer only brief comment regarding the relative lack of evidence for villas in the Roman lands east of the Balkans.<sup>1</sup> In the east, it is pointed out, there is no archaeological evidence to compare with the great villas of the western provinces: no Montmaurin or Piazza Armerina, no Fliessem or Fishbourne.<sup>2</sup> Nor have studies of the major literary sources, in particular Libanius, revealed much to suggest a taste among the urban élite for the building of luxurious residences on their estates near the towns.<sup>3</sup>

In some parts of the Roman east, in particular in Syria, archaeological survey has helped to define the character of rural settlement in some detail.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that in many regions rural development during the Roman period was not based on large villa-estates of the type common in the Roman west, but rather on nucleated village settlements (κῶμαι) which provided a secure base for the agricultural exploitation of the surrounding countryside. Much of our knowledge of rural building types in the Roman east depends on evidence derived from these villages, in many of which the remains of houses, farm buildings, and other utilitarian structures have been carefully recorded.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, there appears to be relatively little evidence in the Roman east for more luxurious types of residential building outside the towns — what Goodchild (commenting on the lack of evidence for such buildings in Roman Cyrenaica) defined as “villas fitted with mosaics, baths, and the other appurtenances of fully developed Roman life”.<sup>6</sup> In the eastern provinces, it seems, villas of this type were not a normal focus of upper class investment. As Petit states with regard to Antioch: “la richesse curiale ne se perd point dans le luxe d’une vie seigneuriale. Ceux qui le peuvent construisent de belles demeures, mais en ville.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet it would be wrong to discount the luxury villa entirely as a feature of the eastern landscape. A reassessment of the available evidence for villas in the east, both of the scattered archaeological findings and of the relevant literary sources, suggests that the development of luxury villas of essentially

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1 See for example J. Percival, *The Roman villa* (London 1978) 51ff; H. Mielsch, *Die römische Villa* (Munich 1987) 161ff.; A. G. MacKay, *Roman houses, villas and palaces* (London 1975) 211; R. J. A. Wilson, *Piazza Armerina* (London 1983) 108 n.43.

2 J. Balty, “Notes sur l’habitat romain, byzantin et arabe d’Apamée. Rapport de synthèse,” *Actes du Colloque. Apamée de Syrie. Bilan des recherches archéologiques, 1973-1979* (Brussels 1984) 492-94.

3 P. Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle après Jesus Christ* (Paris 1955) 334-35; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch: city and imperial administration in the later Roman empire* (Oxford 1972) 51.

4 The pioneering work is that of G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord*, 3 vols. (Paris 1953-58); more recent studies include F. Villeneuve in J. M. Dentzer, *Hauran 1. Recherches archéologiques sur le Syrie du Sud à l’époque hellénistique et romaine* (Paris 1985) 113-16; D. Urman, *The Golan* (BAR Int.Ser. 269, Oxford 1985); S. Applebaum, “Judaea as a Roman province; the countryside as a political and economic factor,” *ANRW II.8* (1978) 355-96. For a recent summary of work in Syria, see *Contribution française à l’archéologie syrienne 1969-1989* (Institut Française d’Archéologie du Proche-Orient, Damascus 1989) 151-58, 205-9.

5 E.g. O. Callot, *Huilleries antiques du Syrie du nord* (Paris 1984); J.-P. Sodini and G. Tate “Maisons d’époque romaine et byzantine (II-VI<sup>e</sup> siècles) du massif calcaire de Syrie du nord. Étude typologique” in *Colloque Apamée de Syrie* (supra n.2) 377-430.

6 R. G. Goodchild, *Tabula Imperii Romani. Cyrene* (Oxford 1954) 6.

7 Petit (supra n. 3) 335.